



On Benjamin King

What does it mean to be a landscape painter in 2021—yet another of the Really Bad Years? At the very least—the facile may nod now—it means messing with the art of the past: rejiggering tired visual formulas from Poussin to Cézanne, blowing up Monet's haystacks, pissing on Pissarro, and even dissing on David—as in Hockney—and those pellucid, late-style, just-too-lovely-for-words Yorkshire dales and dells and gay green escarpments. Furze fantasia by iPhone; get thee behind me, Bridlington.

The superlative painter Benjamin King is a rejigger for sure, part of the “New Landscape Painting” generation—a talented group of youngish, punkish, largely North American contemporary artists who bring a new turbulence, uncertainty, and emotional vulnerability to the rendering of the natural world. Members of the posse—quick list—might include Shara Hughes, Hayley Barker, Jonas Wood, Allison Gildersleeve, Jon Joanis (oddly undersung), Angelina Gualdoni, and the late Matthew Wong. Not all have been exclusively landscape painters (Wood, for one, is all over the place) although King himself fits the label. (There's a grand progenitrix, too: the masterful, off-kilter Lois Dodd, still making wild outdoor paintings at 94.) For these new nature painters, ‘messing,’ loudly or quietly, with the scenic language of the past is indeed part of the point and witnessed in a slew of shared satiric gambits: an often cartoonish, zine- or outsider-style figuration (trees like giant lollipops, crude triangles for mountains, eerie childlike oval ponds); a preference for dislocating, verging-on-scandalous color schemes; raggedy or scratchy brushwork, like a pattern-language, alternating with preternatural flatness; and, motif-wise, certain edgy, recurrent harbingers of damage—cataracts, explosions, strange growths, night fires, things melting or withering or long dried-up. The landscapes of video gaming and sci-fi graphics—at once exciting and dead—sometimes exert a contaminating influence: what's enthralling is how much dazzling beauty is achieved.

All this is true of Benjamin, very broadly speaking: the picture of nature one finds in his work is as thoroughly weighted with irony as that of his peers. These new landscapists are an unsentimental lot. But there is something more in King's painting, too: a kind of residual moral scrupulousness, a seriousness, and a depth of emotion at once passionate and distinctive. The work is not flippant; King is never a mere debunker or maker of cartoons. On the contrary, his hypnotic, discursive tableaux—the orange and purple outcroppings, crusty clouds and funky rivulets, the contused wetlands, pink and yellow and black—themselves seem to be *thinking*: about what it means to exist in the time and space of the picture, about the possible conditions under which all things might grow or persist, if not thrive. The brusque gray rocks and leopard-spotted tree trunks have their own kind of uncanny sentience—secret “as if” powers of cogitation and judgment.

Alas, though, they don't seem to think very well of us. Why should they? It has become commonplace to note the absence of human beings in King's trippy Great Outdoors; and equally common to see in that absence a grim environmental allegory: that through our fatal squandering of resources and toxic mass malfeasance, we are destroying the planet. The planet, in turn, will destroy us—is *already* destroying us; the endgame, some say, has begun. Any day now the die-off, our grand finale as a species. Do King's oddly thoughtful-looking pea-green skies and philosophical waterfalls, bruised into rich painterly blackness, intimate the scarred yet pulsating vistas of the future—after we've made nature itself radiant and unnatural and brought about, in an apogee of stupidity, our own obliteration?



The argument has some heft, of course; endgames are a lonely-making business. Where'd everybody go? But I find King's vision more subtle—again, more scrupulous, and ultimately less than hospitable to despair. Yes, his renderings of the natural world can often seem shot through with a thoroughly disquieting sense of loss. The paintings feel saturated with grief at times: the oddly stained beauty, the magnificent discolorations, seem emblematic of everything in the biosphere that changes for us now, perhaps irrevocably. Making fun of Poussin or Monet's water lilies won't fix it. Something far worse, King seems to want to remind us, is in the offing.

Yet I also take heart, paradoxically, from King's generosity as an artist. Generosity with the paint, first of all, the sheer wet-on-wet gorgeousness of his surfaces, and the limpid ingenuity of his designs—always elegant. The camera pans backwards, the land recedes, exactly as it should. But I also cherish his buoyant will to connect, to make us feel something through the images—lose the numbness. King lives and paints out in the woods of upstate New York somewhere, it's true, but he is hardly a hermit. How could he be? He is the father of three small children. I may be perverse—let's hope so—but I question easy assertions about the lack of human presence in his work. King's paintings are full of people; you just can't see them. Or, perhaps I should say: at least not right away. They are there, however, hidden in the squiggly little leaf-faces populating his charming blob-trees and blob-bushes; everybody has crammed in for the fun of it. Sometimes, as in a painting of Ben's I am grateful to have on my wall, the landforms resolve into something metamorphically human; I found a giant goofy primate-head in the mix the other day, slyly shaped out of green and blue hills and shadows. And most recently, as in his marvelous new paintings in the current Freight+Volume show, we have nothing less than *tents*—lovely human-made things—with all the people, poetically speaking, that tents should and do imply. Whole communities of people: eating, drinking, sleeping, toasting s'mores, calling back and forth, and yes, maybe reproducing in the candlelight. Granted, the canvas geometry here is jagged, origami-like, not much headroom in these weird tents, but what are they for, if not to keep us (somewhat) warm and dry and to remind us how to live together *in* nature—*with* nature—modestly, without hogging all the space, disgorging odious poisons, or reducing everything we see to ash?

The tents make me feel hopeful; Benjamin King isn't giving up. We've made a mess of things, for sure; here in California, thanks to unending conflagration, the sky turns a revolting new color almost every day. King captures these unnatural colors of our moment with exquisite flair, but in his keen, unflinching, ever-heartfelt paintings, he also gives us Something Big to Think About, something we need to confront with urgency and toughness, and something curiously close to joy. We're not dead yet.

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